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ABSTRACT

Of the four language skills, reading is probably tested most often, and it may seem to be the easiest to test. However, testing reading proficiency has its difficulties, and the test constructor must be aware of several issues. Reading involves a number of skills, and the number and complexity of these must be recognized. Choosing the text to test reading can have an impact on the results. It is useful to use a variety of texts, and they should reflect the goals of the language teaching situation, whether, for example, the intended language use will be academic or conversational. It must be recognized that background knowledge plays a part in comprehension, so that intended difficulty levels are not confused by the test taker's lack of familiarity with the context. Reading tasks frequently begin with assessment of low-level skills and often involve word and sentence recognition tasks. In testing middle and higher-level students, rue/false questions, multiple-choice items, short answer or completion questions, and ordering tasks are often used. The selection of test items and passages should reflect the context in which the student expects to use the language. (SLD)

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Testing Reading

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Reading is probably the most common of the four skills to be tested, and it may seem to be the easiest of the skills to test. However, testing reading does have difficulties, and there are issues that anyone testing reading should be aware of.

Traditional reading tests tend to make use of short prose passages and ask general comprehension questions. These often do not deal with the variety of skills involved in reading or the variety of texts that testees may encounter.

Skills Involved in Reading

Among the skills involved in reading are:

1. associating graphic symbols with sounds and words
2. understanding relationships between pieces of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, negation, and embedding
3. deducing meanings of words from their roots and affixes
4. deducing meanings of words from the context
5. understanding presuppositions (e.g., "The driver did not stop for the stop sign" includes the presupposition that there was a stop sign.)
6. understanding relationships among parts of the text, signalled by such devices as lexical devices (synonyms, repetition, etc.), anaphoric reference (pronouns) and connectives (e.g., because, therefore)
7. understanding temporal and spatial relationships
8. understand relationships such as cause and effect; generalization and example; comparison; contrast; and opinion and support.
9. anticipating what will come next
10. identify the main idea and supporting details
11. understanding figurative language and allegories
12. understanding inferences
13. skimming (getting an overall idea of the passage)
14. scanning (looking specific information)
15. reading critically

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16. varying reading strategies according to the type of text and the purpose of reading

While various lists have been made of the skills involved in reading, these are never clear cut. It is difficult to decide which skills are actually being used. It is also difficult to determine which skills are easiest, since what appears intuitively to be an easy skill might be one that gives readers a lot of difficulty and visa versa. However, from the point of view of making a test, lists of skills can be useful, since it encourages test maker to broaden their approach from just asking testees to find facts in the text.

Choosing a Text

The text that is used to test reading can have an impact on the results. In this section, we will discuss some of the factors that need to be considered.

Variety

It is useful to use a variety of texts when testing reading. It is traditional to use prose to test reading skills, but there are many other types of texts that can be used for testing. Some of these include schedules, newspaper articles, advertisements, and instructions.

Type of Text

The type of text chosen should reflect the goals of the language teaching situation. If students are studying academic English, the texts should come from such sources. If they are studying English to use it in their daily lives, such texts as menus, leaflets, or letters might be useful.

Reading and Background Knowledge

One of the issues in testing reading that must be taken into account is that background knowledge plays an important part in reading comprehension. Briefly, when reading a text for which we have some background knowledge, we are able to comprehend it more easily and more completely and to make more accurate inferences from it than when reading a text for which we have little background knowledge. Imagine, for example, reading an account of a game in a sport about which you know little or nothing, and compare that with reading an account of a game in a sport that you know a lot about. In the former case, you will probably understand little of the description of the game, and in the latter case, you will probably understand almost everything--even information that the writer does not state directly. If you are familiar with baseball, you know

that a game with a score of 15-13 was an unusually high scoring game, even if the writer does not say so. The reading text chosen as the basis for the test must be one that the testees are likely to have fairly similar levels of background knowledge on. If not, testees who have background knowledge will have a great advantage over those who don't, whatever their reading proficiency.

In addition, the text should not be about a subject that the testees are either very familiar with or very unfamiliar with. It must be considered that for a text for which they have considerable background knowledge, they will probably be able to answer the questions without even understanding the test. If, in contrast, it is about a subject for which testees have almost no background knowledge, they are likely to have a great deal of difficulty understanding, and particularly making inferences, even if they are fairly good readers.

Difficulty

In choosing a text, the test maker needs to take into account its difficulty. If the test is too difficult, few of the testees will do well; if it is too easy, too many of the testees will do well. However, the issue of difficulty is not a simple one. For subject areas for which they have good background knowledge, testees may be able to handle a more difficult text than for subject areas for which they have little background knowledge.

Tasks to Test Reading

There are a wide variety of tasks that can be used to test reading ability. Since there are many more possible tasks than we can deal with in this article, we will present some of the more common and useful ones.

Testing Low Level Skills

There are some tasks that can be used to test very low level skills such as word recognition, sentence recognition, and word and sentence comprehension. These types of tasks have a place when testing students who are just beginning to read English, but they should not be used to test students beyond that basic level. It is useful to have testees do these tasks under time pressure, since they are intended to test skills that much be performed automatically in higher levels of reading.

Word recognition. Testees are presented with one word and a series of four or five words. They are instructed to mark the word that is the same as the first word.

Sentence recognition. This is similar to the previous task. Testees are presented with sentences instead of words and indicate which sentences are the same.

Word and picture matching. There are two variations on this task. The first is to give testees four similar pictures and one sentence. They are instructed to identify the picture that is described by the sentences. The other task is look at one picture with four similar sentences and decide which of the sentences accurately describes the picture. A variation on this is to give the testees, for example, ten sentences and have them choose five that accurately describe the picture.

Tasks for Middle and Higher Level Students

True/False Questions. Probably the most common type of task is true/false questions. They are particularly useful for progress tests, since they can be constructed relatively quickly and easily, and they are also easy to mark. The drawback of true/false tests, though, are that testees have a fifty/fifty chance of getting the correct answer, meaning that the facility value is likely to be around 75 percent. This means that the test may not discriminate well between high and low level students, unless there are a lot of questions.

There are at least two ways of dealing with this problem. One is to introduce a penalty for guessing. For example, two points could be awarded for each correct answer and one point deducted for each incorrect answer. Another way is to make a third alternative--the information is not in the reading. This type of question is sometimes difficult to write, though, because it may be difficult to make statements that appear close to the content of the reading passage without actually being correct. In other words, it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between what information can reasonably be inferred from the passage and what information is not there at all.

There are two types of true/false questions--questions that are independent of any passage and those which depend on the passage. In the case of questions that are independent, it is the testees' understanding of the language of the question itself that is being tested. In this case the content of the questions are about general knowledge all of the students could be expected to know, such as "Japan is smaller than the United States." Obviously it is necessary that all of the statements be ones that are within the knowledge of all of the testees.

For true/false tests that are dependent on the passage, testees read a passage and then answer questions directly related to the passage. These kinds of tests are frequently used for relatively elementary students, but they can also be written for intermediate and advanced students. Generally, in this case, the true/false test should test the understanding of the reading passage, not of the questions themselves. Therefore, it is important to take the questions themselves clear, concise, and easily understandable.

In addition, true/false items should be based on a rewording of the text or a possible misunderstanding of the text. The questions should not, except in a test that is intended to be very easy, use the same words as the text. Since statements that use the words "always" or "never" are usually false, these words should be avoided in the true/false statements.

Multiple choice questions. Multiple choice tasks, like true/false questions, are easy to mark. They have the advantage over true false questions that there are more than two (or three) alternatives. Multiple choice questions can be made with four or possibly five alternatives. The problem is that it is often difficult to write incorrect alternatives. The alternatives must all be reasonable but clearly incorrect. Writing three or four such statements is often difficult.

One type of multiple choice item has a sentence or a few sentences, and testees chooses from four words the one that fits in the context. For example:

We are moving to a city that has good schools, some nice parks, and safe streets. It is a good (environment, aura, background, medium) to raise children.

This type of question can be used with testees of various levels. If testing vocabulary is the goal, then the context sentences should be easy, and the level of difficulty of the alternative words should be varied, depending on the presumed level of proficiency of the testees.

Another type of multiple choice question is one in which testees are given a sentence, and they are asked to decide which of four other sentences has the same meaning. This type of tasks tests understanding of grammatical structures.

Finally, multiple choice questions can be used to test the understanding of a reading passage. Testees can either be given a short reading passage with only one question or a longer passage with several questions.

Writing multiple choice items is, as mentioned above, often difficult. Like statements for true/false items, they should not duplicate the wording of the passage and they should reflect some possible misunderstanding of the text. None of the alternatives should stand out, for example, by being much longer or shorter than the others. None of the alternatives should be the opposite of the correct alternative (because that usually indicates that one of the opposites is the correct alternative). Incorrect alternatives should not have similar meanings. (Since they can't both be right, they must both be wrong.) Answering the item must depend on the information in the text, not the testee's general knowledge. All options should be grammatically correct, since this is intended to be a reading test, not a grammar test. "All of the above" or "none of the above" are useful alternatives, but there should not be a pattern of having that type of alternative always the correct answer or never the correct answer.

It is often a temptation to concentrate on facts and figures. However, items should also test information that can be inferred from the reading passage or require testees to put together information from more than one place in the passage.

Pretesting tests is always important, but particularly with multiple choice questions. It is very easy, for example, to make more than one correct alternative but not realize that a second alternative is also correct when considered from another point of view. Getting a fresh perspective on the items is important.

Short answer/completion questions. Various types of short answer questions can be used to test reading comprehension. These have the advantage that they require production rather than recognition, but they are more difficult to mark that true/false or multiple choice questions. Teachers will be presented with a range of answers, some correct, some incorrect, and some partially correct, and he or she has to decide how to deal with these.

A very common type of short answer question has a question to which the testees respond, using information from the text. Another type makes gives a sentence stem, and the testees write in a word or words to complete the sentence, based on the information in the text. Testees can

be presented with a partially completed chart which they fill in with information from the text.

Ordering tasks. Testees may read a text and be given a series of statements covering the information in the text to put in order. This is particularly useful for tests with a built-in sequencing, such as instructions or a narrative, but it can also be used to emphasize the development of ideas in the text. An additional feature might be to include some statements with information which is not in the text and instruct testees to indicate any such statements.

Summary

Testing reading may seem easy at first glance, but the possible difficulties should not be overlooked. The choice or writing of the text should be carefully considered so that they reflect the tasks for which the students will use English and so that background knowledge will not give some students advantages over others. In addition, the writing of the questions should be carefully considered and pretested.